

ORM Corner

Are You Ready to

By HM2 Jason M. Pollock

I walked into the brief with my Cat. I aircrew student, who was ready to knock out his SAR 2 syllabus flight. It was a typical MH-60 flight day: brief at 0900, launch at 1130, and land at 1530. My student and I had tried twice the previous week to complete this flight, but the June weather in “sunny” San Diego hadn’t cooperated. With this week’s weather finally above minimums and improving, we hoped to get the X.

The brief covered our aircraft assignment, mission, EPs, and other standard information.

We got to the portion of the brief where we discussed operational risk management (ORM).

Our safety officer had introduced a new ORM form that was a significant change from the old one. A few of the changes incorporated aircrew-performance calculations: adding total helicopter-aircraft commander (HAC) time, as well as total flight time; and, rather than a low total points indicating low risk, the higher the total points, the higher the perceived safety margin.

In addition, the human-factors (HF) section



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Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to:

Ted Wiggins, Code 11,
Naval Safety Center,
375 A St.,
Norfolk, VA 23511-4399
(757) 444-3520, ext. 7271 (DSN-564).
E-mail: theodore.wiggins@navymil.

Photo by PH2 Michael Sandberg
Modified



was adjusted. With our old ORM form, we were mandated to take points for things like birth, death, marriage, divorce, and an imminent move. Any other HF points taken were based on ambiguous personal criteria. For instance, “I’m a little bit stressed; I’ll take a point.”

On the new form, the five-step ORM process, the four principles of ORM, and a risk-assessment matrix were added to the top of the form. Any HF that didn’t fit into the above categories was to be evaluated, using the entire process. This new system forced us to identify the risks associated with our HF and actually to think about the risk.

I initially thought the system was silly. Seriously, we’re professionals; we can compartmentalize and do our job. Then, during the brief, I actually used the process and thought about my experiences in the previous month. I was under unusually high mental strain. My relationship of four years was ending. My 7-year-old daughter had been with me for the last two weeks for her summer visitation, and she was starting a new, less structured and less supervised day-camp program. I just had moved into my new and more expensive apartment three weeks earlier. These things would and should be stressful to everyone, but I am a professional aircrewman and a fleet-replacement-aircrewman instructor. So, when asked about human factors during the brief, I responded with my standard, “I’m compartmentalized and ready to fly.”

Aircraft turn-up and takeoff were uneventful, and we were en route to the dips. Finally, we would complete a SAR 2 syllabus flight for my student. He was an above-average student and was doing a great job. He quickly and appropriately responded to all the emergency procedures I threw at him. His headwork and CRM were good, but something was missing; that something missing was with me.

I couldn’t concentrate. I missed radio calls. My CRM was breaking down. Why? I was thinking about my daughter’s day and how I was going to feel during the relationship-ending process. I also hoped everything would work out with my new apartment, and I wondered how I would make ends meet while my daughter stayed with me. I thought about everything but flying low-level over the ocean in a potentially dangerous training environment. I was risking the lives of four people, including myself, and I had no business being in the air.

After my realization, I increased my efforts to concentrate on the task at hand. The mission was completed uneventfully, and we went home to hot seat and crew swap the aircraft. I went to my flight surgeon and downed myself for a couple days, got my head straight, and returned to the flight schedule “compartmentalized and ready to fly.”

What did I do wrong? First, I didn’t tell my crew during the brief I had stress that might affect my performance. Second, I overestimated my abilities, based on the idea I had something to prove: I had to be a hacker. My thoughts were, “I am a professional aviator, and we compartmentalize. I have a job to do. If I can’t keep my head straight all the time, regardless of my stress, then I don’t belong with this group of professionals.” After all, the only thing that matters is getting out the mission—right? Wrong!

As a professional aviator, and more so as instructors, we have a responsibility to our crew, our students, our aircraft, and certainly to ourselves to make reasonable and appropriate decisions based on changing situations. This concept includes internal, as well as external factors. Yes, the flight schedule and productivity of your squadron may be affected, but it will be significantly more affected if you and your crew are involved in a mishap because you weren’t totally thinking about the mission at hand.

HM2 Pollock flies with HC-3.

